

January 29, 2003

CHAIRPERSON GAER: It's also my pleasure to introduce, for welcoming remarks, a gentleman who has provided a huge amount of assistance to the organizers of the panel and has worked closely with the Commissioners to ensure that our guests are here, are briefed and are anxious to participate, and that is His Excellency Ishaq Shahryar, the Ambassador of Afghanistan to the United States.

Mr. Shahryar?

AMBASSADOR SHAHRYAR: Thank you very much. Good morning. Distinguished panelists, Your Excellency Minister Karimi, and distinguished delegates from Afghanistan, I welcome you all here, and ladies and gentlemen.

It is a great privilege to be here with you today in such honored company and to discuss a subject of such significance as religious freedom. In business, I was always advised never to speak of religion or politics with your customers, and now in diplomacy, I am called upon to speak of nothing else, but to do so diplomatically.

Where we are meeting today, in the capital of the great Nation of the United States of America, demonstrates how a nation, with affirmament of freedom of religion, can strive and become great. America was created with religious tolerance as its primary base and has practiced that and benefited from it for more than 250 years.

Afghanistan had a similar proud history of numerous religious co-existence in its 4,000-year history; that is, until the recent 25-year interruption. During that tragic time for Afghanistan, the world witnessed the devastating results of repression and tyranny, first, of the former Soviet Union and then of the notorious Taliban, both equally destructive to Afghanistan and their

people.

It is not surprising to note that the first thing accomplished by both governments in order to crush the spirit of the invaded was to take away the freedom to practice their religion. It is perhaps wrong to say that the spirit of the Afghan people was ever crushed. Dampened, perhaps by the scourge of the relentless tyranny of a generation, but never crushed, because that could never happen to the true spirit and love of God of the courageous and resilient Afghan people.

It is the greatest of ironies that the most profound love of all, the love of God, can be distorted in the zealotry, hatred and violence. The three great religions of the world--Islam, Christianity and Judaism--have the same standard, the same higher being to whom humanity owes its creation. It is devotion in its allegiance. It was the great Muslim poet, Rumi, who said that if you took something of each of the most revered figures of the great religions, from Mohammad, from Abraham, from Moses and from Jesus, and put them together, you would have created a perfect person.

In fact, there is a tremendous similarity, a synergy, with the three religions of the world. Each of them does not begin with the teaching of evil. Each of them begins with the same instruction, those of goodness, love, kindness and brotherhood. Again, it was Rumi who said that when he went to a mosque, to a church, and then to a synagogue, he saw the same God.

Religion is never evil. It is the evil individual who, as President Bush so wisely said, would hijack religion and distort its beliefs for his or her own personal goals. No religion teaches evil. It is the evil individual seeking power who imparts a twisted version of religious beliefs to the unsuspecting. All religion seeks to provide a means for a man to love and worship a being greater than themselves, and that means through the good - not the malevolent, misguided actions of some.

While the rest have spent centuries studying and acquiring great knowledge of Christianity and Judaism, there remains here a tragic amount of misunderstanding and a fundamental lack of knowledge of the true faith of Islam.

As a Muslim, as a diplomat, and as an Afghan, I am continually surprised to observe puzzled

looks on the faces of so many intelligent, well-educated Westerners when I speak about the great tolerance and love of the religion of Islam.

The central principles of Islam are balance and compassion in all walks of life. Islam constantly points to the interlinking of everything, the unity of the universe. Though each individual is responsible for his or her own action, the Koran emphasizes that we must walk softly on the earth and that we are here for a short while only. It is this sense of impermanence that creates not only humility, but the knowledge that we must leave behind things better than we found them.

The Koran tells us to look at the stars in wonder and to acquire knowledge and wonder. Islam places enormous emphasis on knowledge. It is an individual's duty to use his or her own God-given reason to make life the best it can be for themselves and their dependents, and throughout history, ordinary Muslims have cherished an expectation and the benefits such knowledge has produced.

They appreciate the control that knowledge gives them over their destiny, the connections it allows them to form with people different from themselves, and the insight it gives them into their faith and the limits it places on those who exercise power.

In the Muslim world, if the scholar is silent, it is not only knowledge that is lost, it is the pursuit of knowledge, part of God's will that is also lost. This is why the Afghan government, under the leadership of President Karzai, is working tirelessly to restore this true Islam on the people of Afghanistan, a faith that always promotes the rights of women and children, that protects human rights and that ensures religious tolerance. God willing, with your help and with the assistance of the international community, we can achieve this goal.

Thank you.